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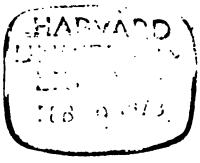

TO

C. S.

MY FRIEND

AND THE MORE MY FRIEND

THAT HE IS THE FRIEND OF ALL

PREFATORY NOTE.

THIS little work is a reprint, with considerable alterations and additions, of three articles which appeared in *The Australian Herald* about a year ago, shortly after Whitman's death. It aims in the first place at a portrayal of the man, and, after that, at a vindication of the poet and his message. Whitman's faults, chiefly of literary execution, are, like his merits, great; but as they are so very obvious and have so often been expatiated upon, I have done little more than allude to them. What is excellent in him completely overshadows what is defective; and what that excellence is, I have, in what follows, imperfectly tried to indicate.

SOUTH YARRA,
MELBOURNE, *June 2, 1893.*

As I ponder'd in silence,
Returning upon my poems, considering, lingering long,
A Phantom arose before me with distrustful aspect,
Terrible in beauty, age, and power,
The genius of poets of old lands,
As to me directing like flame its eyes,
With finger pointing to many immortal songs,
And menacing voice, "What singest thou?" it said,
"Know'st thou not there is but one theme for ever-enduring bards?
And that is the theme of War, the fortune of battles,
The making of perfect soldiers."

"Be it so," then I answered,
"I too, haughty Shade, also sing war, and a longer and greater one than any,
Waged in my book with varying fortune, with flight, advance and retreat, victory deferr'd and wavering,
(Yet methinks certain, or as good as certain, at the last,) the field the world,
For life and death, for the Body and for the eternal Soul,
Lo, I too am come, chanting the chant of battles,
I above all promote brave soldiers."

—WALT WHITMAN.

WALT WHITMAN.

I.

WALT WHITMAN was born on May 31st, 1819, at the farm of West Hills, Long Island, in the State of New York. His father and mother both came of people who had been farmers in the neighbourhood for several generations. A paternal ancestor of his, named the Rev. Zechariah Whitman, emigrated from England to America in 1640. His mother was of Dutch extraction, her maiden name being Louisa Van Velsor. Whitman was the second in a family of eight. In 1824 the Whitmans went to live in Brooklyn, where the father followed the trade of carpenter and builder. In the same year an incident occurred which is chronicled as follows by John Burroughs: "On the visit of General Lafayette to this country in 1824 he came over to Brooklyn in state, and rode through the city. The children of the schools turned out to join in the welcome. An edifice for a free public library for youths was just then commencing, and Lafayette con-

sented to stop on his way and lay the corner-stone. Numerous children arriving on the ground, where a huge irregular excavation for the building was already dug, surrounded with heaps of rough stone, several gentlemen assisted in lifting the children to safe or convenient spots to see the ceremony. Among the rest Lafayette, also, helping the children, took up the five-year-old Walt Whitman, and pressing the child a moment to his breast and giving him a kiss, handed him down to a safe spot in the excavation." Thus the veteran of two great revolutions and one of the pioneers of democracy embraced the future poet of democracy and inspirer of revolutions (peaceful, let us hope) which are yet to be. Was there a memory of this kiss in Whitman's mind when he wrote of his songs?—

Not songs of loyalty alone are these,
But songs of insurrection also;
For I am the sworn poet of every dauntless rebel the world over,
And he going with me leaves peace and routine behind him,
And stakes his life to be lost at any moment.

After having been for some years at the public schools in Brooklyn, Whitman, when about ten years of age, began life as a boy in a

lawyer's office. "I had a nice desk and window-nook to myself," he says; "Edward C. [Clarke, his employer] kindly helped me at my hand-writing and composition, and (the signal event of my life up to that time) subscribed for me to a big circulating library. For a time I now revelled in romance reading of all kinds; first, the *Arabian Nights*, all the volumes—an amazing treat. Then, with sorties in very many other directions, took in Walter Scott's novels, one after another, and his poetry."

Two years later he went to learn the trade of printer at the office of the *Long Island Patriot*, and afterwards worked on the *Long Island Star*. The boy grew fast, and was "nearly as big as a man at fifteen or sixteen." He spent much of his time down Long Island among the farming and sea-faring folks, and made excursions in all directions on foot, on horseback, and by sailing-boat. He had a great love for nature in all its aspects, even for those which are usually considered common or unsightly; but his love for the sea was of a special and passionate kind. The sea inspired some of his best writing, as, for example, that reminiscence of his boyhood beginning,

Out of the cradle endlessly rocking.

In many of his lines we hear its near thunder or its distant boom, and in many the moanings and whisperings of its quieter moods.

In 1836 and 1837 he worked as a compositor in New York; and at the age of eighteen he went school-teaching in the country districts of Long Island. In 1839 he started the *Long Islander*, a weekly paper, in the town of Huntingdon, near which he was born.

During his boyhood, and, indeed, all his life, Whitman was an omnivorous reader; and he made himself acquainted with, and had a real preference for, the masterpieces of literature. He says: "I went regularly every week in the mild seasons down to Coney Island, at that time a long, bare, unfrequented shore, which I had all to myself, and where I loved, after bathing, to race up and down the hard sand, and declaim Homer or Shakspere to the surf and sea-gulls by the hour." In another place he says that he often used to ride the whole length of Broadway on the top of an omnibus, declaiming some stormy passage from Julius Cæsar or Richard, which he could roar as loudly as he chose in the "heavy, dense, uninterrupted street bass." And Mr. Moncure Conway says, in describing a visit he paid to him in

later years: "The books he seemed to know and love best were the Bible, Homer, and Shakspere; these he owned, and probably had in his pockets while we were talking."

As a boy he was also fond of debating societies, and went to the theatre in New York as often as he could. As to his first attempts at authorship, he says: "I commenced when I was but a boy of eleven or twelve, writing sentimental bits for the old *Long Island Patriot*, in Brooklyn. This was about 1831. Soon after, I had a piece or two in George P. Morris's then celebrated and fashionable *Mirror*, of New York City. I remember with what half-suppressed excitement I used to watch for the big, fat, redfaced, slow-moving, very old English carrier, who distributed the *Mirror* in Brooklyn; and when I got one, opening and cutting the leaves with trembling fingers. How it made my heart double-beat to see *my piece* on the pretty white paper, in nice type."

From 1840 to 1849 he worked in New York and Brooklyn as a printer and journalist, taking, as he says, "an occasional shy at poetry." A tall and well-proportioned man, of robust health, tingling with vitality, and radiating that peculiar influence vaguely called mag-

netism, he lived during these years a life that was full of natural enjoyment. It was in the ordinary scenes and occupations of everyday life that he found that satisfaction which others find in literature, or in art, or in studying the habits of earth-worms, or in some special set of religious formulas, and which, indeed, many never find, though they seek for it carefully and with tears. The external aspect of the city, with its rush of variegated crowds and thunder of vehicles; the bay, with its various craft, its ocean tides and picturesque surroundings; the evening streets in moonlight or darkness; the theatre, the opera,—all these he absorbed with eagerness and delight. He had a passion for ferries and omnibuses, and was intimate with the pilots and drivers, remembering the names of many of them till the end of his life. New York—a name which for many sums up all that is prosaic—was his best beloved among cities, as the following lines may show:

City of the sea! city of hurried and glittering tides!
City whose gleeful tides continually rush or recede, whirling in and out with eddies and foam!
City of wharves and stores—city of tall façades of marble and iron!
Proud and passionate city—mettlesome, mad, extravagant city!

and these:

City of hurried and sparkling waters! city of spires and masts!
City nested in bays! my city!

During 1848 and 1849 he edited the *Brooklyn Eagle*, one of the organs of the Democratic party; but in the latter year, having quarrelled with the Democrats, he accepted an engagement on the *New Orleans Crescent*. After a while he went north again, up the Mississippi, visited the great lakes and Lower Canada, and arrived back at New York by way of the Hudson in 1851, having accomplished a journey, from north to south and back again, of about 5,000 miles, during which his knowledge of American customs, character, and scenery was greatly enlarged. His conviction of the real unity of the American character, in spite of its great variety and apparent local contradictions, if it was not acquired, was certainly strengthened during these wanderings; and it must have been about this time that he was taken possession of by the idea of attempting to confirm this unity by expressing the native American genius in a national literature which should draw the American people close together in the pursuit of common ideals and in the participation of a

common affection for America and for each other, a literature which he himself should initiate. He sings—

Solitary, singing in the West, I strike up for a New World;

and again—

Come I will make the continent indissoluble;
I will make the most splendid race the sun ever shone upon;
I will make divine magnetic lands,
With the love of comrades,
With the life-long love of comrades;

and again (which has some bearing on our own question of Federation, Imperial or otherwise)—

It shall be customary in the houses and streets to see manly affection;
The most dauntless and rude shall touch face to face lightly;
The dependence of Liberty shall be lovers;
The continuance of Equality shall be comrades.
These shall tie you and band you stronger than hoops of iron,
I, ecstatic, O partners! O lands! with the love of lovers tie you.

(Were you looking to be held together by lawyers?
Or by an agreement on a paper? or by arms?
Nay, nor the world, nor any living thing, will so cohere.)

In 1851 he started in Brooklyn a newspaper called the *Freeman*, but soon gave it up, and was occupied in house-building till 1853, in

which year he began *Leaves of Grass*, a volume of poems the most splendidly audacious, both in conception and execution, which have ever been given to the world—a world which in some odd corners was roused to a glad and intelligent enthusiasm, but which for the most part was only startled and shocked. This work, which many regard as a rude monument of careless workmanship, was, in reality, carefully rewritten several times before being set up in type by Whitman's own hands, and published in 1855. Emerson, with his usual insight, was among the first to draw attention to it by saying that it was "the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed," thus rightly adjudging to Whitman a higher place than himself. From that time to this it has been only from the few—such as Swinburne, Robert Buchanan, W. M. Rossetti, Professor Clifford, Professor Dowden, J. A. Symonds, John Burroughs, and Moncure Conway—that *Leaves of Grass* has called forth admiration. In general it meets with nothing but ridicule or indignation. It is a favourite butt of witty persons, who remind one of the insects that dart about the surface of some unheeding stream; or it is the target

whereat the bigots of literature and art, of religion and politics, shoot the arrows of their wrath. In 1876, writing of Whitman, then sick, poor, and prematurely old, Robert Buchanan says: "He who wanders through the solitudes of far off Uist or lonely Doncgal, may often behold the Golden Eagle sick to death, worn with age or famine, or with both, passing with weary waft of wing from promontory to promontory, from peak to peak, pursued by a crowd of rooks and crows, which fall back screaming whenever the noble bird turns his indignant head, and which follow frantically once more, hooting behind him, whenever he wends again upon his way." "I find a solid line of enemies to you everywhere," said a correspondent in a letter to him in 1884, and he has himself put it on record that "from a worldly and business point of view, *Leaves of Grass* has been worse than a failure." This opposition the book will in the long run overcome, partly by its own inherent power, and partly because the opposition itself must decrease as the literary and social conventions of the present develop into those of the future. And the direction which literary and social development must take will in some degree be determined by *Leaves of Grass* itself.

II.

It does not appear that Whitman was fond of work in the sense generally understood. When the average man appears to be doing nothing he is usually an exception to the rule that appearances are deceptive. It is good for such a man that he should go into harness and be driven his eight hours a day. But geniuses like Whitman do not often work well in harness. If we would get from them what is great and characteristic we must leave them to themselves; and when they seem most unoccupied, the activity in the substrata of their minds is often most intense. What could seem more full of repose than a ploughed field, newly sown, lying in the radiance of an afternoon sun? Yet the work of germination is going on in every part, resulting at last in a golden expanse of ripe and waving wheat. How silent has been the complex and ceaseless process of which this is the rich achievement! And with what clamour and obtrusiveness we carry out the simple operation of grinding the wheat into flour! The idleness of a man of genius may

be like the repose of a ploughed field, which furnishes at last both food to nourish the body, and beauty to nourish the soul, while the noisy labour of other men is too often like the grinding of indifferent flour out of good wheat.

The next few years succeeding the publication of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* seem to have been passed by Whitman in apparent inactivity. Mr. Moncure D. Conway has given an account of a visit which he paid him about this time, and from that account I make the following extracts:—"Having occasion to visit New York soon after the appearance of Walt Whitman's book, I was urged by some friends to search him out. . . The day was excessively hot, the thermometer at nearly 100 degrees, and the sun blazed down as only on sandy Long Island can the sun blaze. . . . I saw, stretched upon his back, and gazing up straight at the terrible sun, the man I was seeking. With his grey clothing, his blue-grey shirt, his iron-grey hair, his swart sunburnt face and bare neck, he lay upon the brown-and-white grass—for the sun had burnt away its greenness—and was so like the earth upon which he rested that he seemed almost enough a part of it for one to pass by

without recognition. I approached, gave my name and reasons for searching him out, and asked him if he did not find the sun rather hot. 'Not at all too hot,' was his reply; and he confided to me that this was one of his favourite places and attitudes for composing 'poems.' He then walked with me to his home, and took me along its narrow ways to his room. A small room of about fifteen feet square, with a single window looking out on the barren solitudes of the island; a small cot; a washstand, with a little looking-glass hung over it from a tack in the wall; a pine table, with pen, ink, and paper on it; an old line engraving representing Bacchus hung on the wall, and opposite a similar one of Silenus—these constituted the visible environments of Walt Whitman. There was not, apparently, a single book in the room. . . . . He confessed to having no talent for industry, and that his forte was 'loafing and writing poems.' He was poor, but had discovered that he could, on the whole, live magnificently on bread and water."

But a period was approaching, the most interesting and significant in the history both of Whitman and of America. This period—that of the Civil War—was to show that with the same

intensity as Whitman could write poems he could act them; that the "love of comrades" of which in his writings he makes such strong profession, was no mere poetic *furor*, but a passion that burned for other than verbal expression; and that if he could "loaf" and lie in the sun he could also spend himself to the uttermost in working and watching by day and night for his fellow-men. This period was also to justify the faith of the poet in the future of his country, and was to give the world a bloody and decisive object-lesson in the potentialities of democracy, in the virtue and strength which lie at the heart of it. It was to show how a democratic community, composed of average specimens of different races, could be taken possession of by a great idea; how average men could fight with unswerving resolution and reckless courage for a moral principle, forsaking without hesitation, and even with enthusiasm, their leprous politics and their ignoble worship of the almighty dollar.

The war broke out in 1861. In 1862, hearing that his brother George, an officer in the 51st New York Volunteers, had been wounded in the first battle of Fredericksburg, fought on December 13th, Whitman hurried down to the

front. From that time to the end of 1865 he gave himself up almost entirely to attending the sick and wounded, both on the field and in the hospitals. It was through Emerson he obtained the permission of President Lincoln to undertake this work, and to draw the usual army rations; but remuneration in money he altogether refused. His descriptions of scenes in the war, given in his prose work *Specimen Days and Collect*, and reproduced from rough notes made at the time, are terrible and pathetic by turns, and one cannot give a better idea of the work he did at that time than by quoting some of them:—

"The results of the late battle [Fredericksburg] are exhibited everywhere about here in thousands of cases (hundreds die every day), in the camp, brigade, and division hospitals. These are merely tents, and sometimes very poor ones, the wounded lying on the ground, lucky if their blankets are spread on layers of pine or hemlock twigs, or small leaves. No cots; seldom even a mattress. It is pretty cold. The ground is frozen hard, and there is occasional snow. I go around from one case to another. I do not see that I do much good to these wounded and dying; but I cannot leave

them. Once in a while some youngster holds on to me convulsively, and I do what I can for him; at any rate, stop with him, and sit near him for hours if he wishes it. Besides the hospitals, I also go occasionally on long tours through the camps, talking with the men, &c.; sometimes at night among the groups around the fires, in their shebang enclosures of bushes. . . . . I soon get acquainted anywhere in camp, and am always well used."

. . . . . .

"In my visits to the hospitals I found it was in the simple matter of personal presence, and emanating ordinary cheer and magnetism that I succeeded and helped more than by medical nursing or delicacies, or gifts of money, or anything else. During the war I possessed the perfection of physical health. My habit, when practicable, was to prepare for starting out on one of those daily or nightly tours of from a couple to four or five hours by fortifying myself with previous rest, the bath, clean clothes, a good meal, and as cheerful an appearance as possible."

. . . . . .

"This afternoon, July 22nd, [1863], I have spent a long time with Oscar F. Wilber, Com-

pany G, 154th New York, low with chronic diarrhœa, and a bad wound also. He asked me to read him a chapter in the New Testament. I complied, and asked him what I should read. He said, 'Make your own choice.' I opened at the close of one of the first books of the evangelists, and read the chapters describing the latter hours of Christ, and the scenes at the crucifixion. The poor, wasted young man asked me to read the following chapter also—how Christ rose again. I read very slowly for Oscar was feeble. It pleased him very much, yet the tears were in his eyes. He asked me if I enjoyed religion. I said, 'Perhaps not, my dear, in the way you mean, and yet, may be, it is the same thing.' He said, 'It is my chief reliance.' He talked of death, and said he did not fear it. I said, 'Why, Oscar, don't you think you will get well?' He said, 'I may, but it is not probable.' . . . . I felt that he was even then the same as dying. He behaved very manly and affectionate. The kiss I gave him as I was about leaving he returned fourfold. . . . . I had several such interviews with him. He died a few days after the one just described."

. . . . . .

"I am back again in Washington (summer of 1864) on my regular daily and nightly rounds. Of course there are many specialties. Dotting a ward here and there are always cases of poor fellows long-suffering under obstinate wounds, or weak and disheartened from typhoid fever, or the like, marked cases, needing special and sympathetic nourishment; these I sit down and either talk to or silently cheer them up. They always like it hugely (and so do I). Each case has its peculiarities, and needs some new adaptation. I have learnt to thus conform—learnt a good deal of hospital wisdom. Some of the poor young chaps, away from home for the first time in their lives, hunger and thirst for affection; this is sometimes the only thing that will reach their condition. The men like to have a pencil and something to write in. I have given them cheap pocket diaries and almanacs for 1864, interleaved with blank paper. For reading I generally have some old pictorial magazines or story papers (they are always acceptable), also the morning or evening papers of the day. The best books I do not give, but lend to read through the wards, and then take them to others, and so on; they are very punctual about returning the books. In these wards,

or on the field, as I thus continue to go round, I have come to adapt myself to each emergency after its kind or call, however trivial, however solemn, everyone justified and made real under its circumstances—not only visits, and cheering talk, and little gifts—not only washing and dressing wounds (I have some cases where the patient is unwilling anyone should do this but me), but passages from the Bible, expounding them, prayer at the bedside, explanations of doctrine, &c. (I think I see some of my friends smiling at this confession, but I was never more in earnest in my life.)"

. . . . . .

"Some of the half-erased, and not over legible when made, memoranda of things wanted by one patient or another, will convey quite a fair idea. D.S.G., bed 52, wants a good book; has a sore, weak throat; would like some horehound candy. . . . C. H. L., . . . bed 6, with jaundice and erysipelas, also wounded; stomach easily nauseated; bring him some oranges, also a little tart jelly. . . . J.H.G., bed 24, wants an undershirt, drawers, and socks; has not had a change for quite a while; is evidently a neat, clean boy from New England. (I supplied him;

also with a comb, tooth-brush, and some soap and towels. . .)"

. . . . . .

"*March 27th, 1865.*—Sergeant Calvin F. Harlowe . . . a marked sample of heroism and death . . . in the late attack by the rebel troops, and temporary capture by them of Fort Sherman, at night. . . . Suddenly awakened from their sleep . . . Harlowe, with others, found himself in the hands of the secesh*; they demanded his surrender; he answered, *Never while I live.* Of course it was useless; the others surrendered; the odds were too great. Again he was asked to yield, this time by a rebel captain. Though surrounded, and quite calm, he again refused, called sternly to his comrades to fight on, and himself attempted to do so. The rebel captain then shot him, but at the same instant he shot the captain. Both fell together, mortally wounded. Harlowe died almost instantly. . . . Harlowe was only 22 years of age, was a tall, slim, dark-haired, blue-eyed young man . . . and that is the way he met his death after four years' campaign. . . . Though so young, and in a common rank, he had a spirit as

* Secessionists.

resolute and brave as any hero in the books, ancient or modern."

. . . . . .

"During those three years in hospital, camp, or field, I made over six hundred visits or tours, and went, as I estimate, counting all, among from 80,000 to 100,000 of the wounded and sick, as sustainer of spirit and body, in some degree, in time of need. These visits varied from an hour or two to all day or night; for with dear or critical cases I generally watched all night. Sometimes I took up my quarters in the hospital, and slept or watched there several nights in succession. Those three years I consider the greatest privilege and satisfaction (with all their feverish excitement and physical deprivations and lamentable sights), and, of course, the most profound lesson of my life."

. . . . . .

Many other descriptions like these are to be found in *Specimen Days and Collect*. The following lines from the poem called "The Wound Dresser" may also be quoted:

I am faithful, I do not give out;
The fractured thigh, the knee, the wound in the abdomen,
These and more I dress with impassive hand (yet deep in my breast a fire, a burning flame). . . .

The hurt and wounded I pacify with soothing hand ;
I sit by the restless all night, some are so young,
Some suffer so much, I recall the experience sweet and sad,
(Many a soldier's loving arms about this neck have crossed
and rested,
Many a soldier's kiss dwells on these bearded lips.)

Such passages indicate better than pages of eulogy the sort of man that Whitman was, and one may be forgiven for lingering over and amplifying the delineation of so great a soul. John Burroughs, his intimate friend, records the following incident, in which is shown the warm democratic feeling with which the poet was in the habit of entering into relations with his fellow-creatures. "I give here a glimpse of him in Washington on a Navy Yard horse-car, toward the close of the war, one summer day at sundown. The car is crowded and suffocatingly hot, with many passengers on the rear platform, and among them a bearded, florid-faced man, elderly, but agile, resting against the dash, by the side of the young conductor, and evidently his intimate friend. The man wears a broad-brim white hat. Among the jam inside near the door, a young English-woman of the working class, with two children, has had trouble all the way with the youngest, a strong, fat, fretful bright babe of fourteen or

fifteen months, who bids fair to worry the mother completely out, besides becoming a howling nuisance to everybody. As the car tugs around Capitol Hill the young one is more demoniac than ever, and the flushed and perspiring mother is just ready to burst into tears with weariness and vexation. The car stops at the top of the hill to let off most of the rear platform passengers, and the white-hatted man reaches inside and gently but firmly disengaging the babe from its stifling place in the mother's arms, takes it in his own, and out into the air. The astonished and excited child, partly in fear, partly in satisfaction at the change, stops its screaming, and as the man adjusts it more securely to his breast, plants its chubby hands against him, and pushing off as far as it can, gives a good long look squarely in his face—then, as if satisfied, snuggles down with its head on his neck, and in less than a minute is sound and peacefully asleep without another whimper, utterly fagged out. A square or so more and the conductor, who has had an unusually hard and uninterrupted day's work, gets off for his first meal and relief since morning. And now the white-hatted man, holding the slumbering babe also, acts as conductor the

rest of the distance, keeping his eye on the passengers inside, who have by this time thinned out greatly. He makes a very good conductor, too, pulling the bell to stop or go on as needed, and seems to enjoy the occupation. The babe meanwhile rests its fat cheeks close on his neck and grey beard, one of his arms vigilantly surrounding it, while the other signals, from time to time, with the strap; and the flushed mother inside has a good half-hour to breathe, and cool, and recover herself."

All that Whitman did and wrote went to show how clearly he realized his spiritual kinship with men and woman of every social and moral rank. He sings:

This moment yearning and thoughtful, sitting alone,
It seems to me there are other men in other lands yearning and thoughtful,
It seems to me I can look over and behold them in Germany, Italy, France, Spain,
Or far, far away, in China, or in Russia or Japan, talking other dialects,
And it seems to me if I could know those men I should become attached to them as I do to men in my own lands,
O I know we should be brethren and lovers,
I know I should be happy with them.

In another place he exclaims:

I walk with delinquents with passionate love,
I feel I am of them—I belong to these convicts and prostitutes myself,
And henceforth I will not deny them—for how can I deny myself?

Addressing a fallen woman he says:

Not till the sun excludes you do I exclude you,
Not till the waters refuse to glisten for you and the leaves to rustle for you, do my words refuse to glisten and rustle for you.

When spiritual kinship such as this is recognised as a fundamental fact of our nature, "it generates," as is well said by Mr. W. Clarke, M.A., the author of an excellent little work on Whitman, "a feeling of brotherhood very different from that condescending pity which a benevolent peer might entertain for a starving needlewoman."

The poet's appearance, too, was in keeping with his character and genius. "I have studied him as I have studied the birds," says Burroughs, "and I have found that the nearer I got to him the more I saw. . . . . His face exhibits a rare combination of harmony and sweetness with strength—strength like the vaults and piers of the Roman architecture. Sculptor never carved a finer ear, a more imaginative brow. . . . . He does not make

the impression of the scholar or artist or *littérateur*, but such as you would imagine the antique heroes to make, that of a sweet-blooded, receptive, perfectly normal, catholic man, with further than that, a look about him that is best suggested by the word elemental or cosmical." Thoreau, keen of eye and tongue, said of him that he suggested something a little more than human; and the impressions of other observers might be given in corroboration of those already quoted, but all of them may be summed up in the words of Abraham Lincoln, who exclaimed on seeing the poet, "Well, he looks like a man."

Although never actually called upon to take up arms in the cause of the North, he always kept his name on the list of those willing to serve. He did not, however, come through the war unscathed. In the summer of 1864 he was disabled for six months by hospital malaria, and was never the same man again. In the beginning of 1865 he obtained a clerkship in the Office of the Interior, but still continued his work in the hospitals. In June of the same year Mr. Harlan, Minister of the Interior, hearing that Whitman was the author of *Leaves of Grass*, dismissed him, as, in the passages

where it treats of sex-relation, the book was said to be indecent. It may be admitted that in his treatment of the great fact of parenthood, as in his treatment of other subjects, there is in Whitman a frequent crudity and baldness; but the passages in question are no more indecent than the undraped statue of a Greek athlete, on which, when one looks, his feelings are elevated or impure according to the elevation or impurity of his character. No natural object or function is in itself indecent, and only a prurient way of thinking can make it so. Nor is it the exact truth to say that to the pure all is pure. Everything that is in itself pure will always under all circumstances be pure to the pure; but avarice, hate, lust, greed, cruelty, injustice, being in their very nature vile, will to the pure be ever impure and hateful. It is only the impure who in the obscene recesses of their thought can debauch things that are in themselves healthy and clean, things, moreover, which are not merely pure by the absence of impurity, but which are positively sacred as normal and inevitable facts of a natural order which is the deliberate expression of a self-conscious absolute divine Spirit. And it may even be said of the condemned passages in *Leaves of Grass* that

they are so far from ministering to pruriency that they actually tend to rebuke and purify it. "Well has it been said," says Burroughs, to whom every student of Whitman must ever be indebted, "that the man or woman who has *Leaves of Grass* for a daily companion will be under the constant, invisible influence of sanity, cleanliness, strength, and a gradual severance from all that corrupts and makes morbid and mean." Many of Whitman's admirers, however, including Emerson, draw the line at the point where he begins to deal with this subject of parenthood, and it must be confessed that his utterances in this regard are pretty strong meat, unfit for babes, adolescent or adult; but they are certainly to be recommended to the serious private study of properly matured men and women.

Soon after his dismissal Whitman got another appointment in the office of the Attorney-General. In 1865 he published *Drum Taps*—a volume of poems on subjects suggested by the war. *A Sequel* followed shortly after, and was of the same character. Both works, as, indeed, all the poems that Whitman subsequently wrote, are now incorporated with *Leaves of Grass*. His prose writings, which are mostly

of a fragmentary character, are collected in the volume called *Specimen Days and Collect*; and most of them are included in two volumes of the Camelot Series, called respectively *Specimen Days in America*, and *Democratic Vistas and Other Papers*. A good and cheap selection from his poems is published in the "Canterbury Poets," with an appreciative introduction by Ernest Rhys; and an even better selection is published by Chatto and Windus, to which a biographical and critical preface is contributed by W. M. Rossetti. The only British edition of his complete works is published by Wilson and McCormick of Glasgow.

In 1873 he was struck down by paralysis, having never quite recovered from the strain of the war-time. He rallied somewhat in 1876 by going down to live at a farm-house near Camden, New Jersey, where, dragging himself through the lanes and by the creeks, he made those copious nature-notes which were afterwards published in *Specimen Days and Collect*, and which read as if Nature herself were peeping between the lines, Nature with her bees and blossoms, her sunbeams and breezes. Two extracts may be given:

A while since the croaking of the pond frogs and the

first white of the dog-wood blossoms. Now the golden dandelions, in endless profusion, spotting the ground everywhere. The white cherry and pearblows—the wild violets, with their blue eyes looking up and saluting my feet as I saunter the wood-edge—the rosy blush of budding apple-trees—the light, clear emerald hue of the wheat-field—the darker green of the rye—a warm elasticity pervading the air—the cedar bushes profusely decked with their little brown apples—the summer fully awakening—the convocations of blackbirds, garrulous flocks of them, gathering on some tree, and making the hour and place noisy as I sit near.

. . . . . .

As I write, I am seated under a big wild-cherry tree—the warm day tempered by partial clouds and a fresh breeze, neither too heavy nor too light—and here I sit long and long, enveloped in the deep musical drone of these bees, flitting, balancing, darting to and fro about me by hundreds—big fellows with light yellow jackets, great glistening, swelling bodies, stumpy heads, and gauzy wings, humming their perpetual rich mellow boom. (Is there not a hint in it for a musical composition, of which it should be the background? some bumble-bee symphony?) How it all nourishes, lulls me, in the way most needed: the open air, the rye fields, the apple orchards.

From about 1878 to 1884 he was well enough to "travel round considerably," and made excursions to various parts of the States and Canada, visiting Concord among other places, where in 1881 he saw Emerson for the last time. The later years of his life may be indicated in his own words. Writing to a German friend on

May 31st, 1882, he says: "The paralysis that first affected me nearly ten years ago has since remained. . . I easily tire, am very clumsy, cannot walk far; but my spirits are first-rate. I go around in public almost every day—now and then take long trips, by railroad or boat, hundreds of miles—live largely in the open air—am sun-burnt and stout (weigh 190) —keep up my activity and interest in life, people, progress, and the questions of the day. About two-thirds of the time I am quite comfortable. What mentality I ever had remains entirely unaffected; though physically I am a half paralytic, and likely to be so, long as I live. But the principal object of my life seems to have been accomplished—I have the most devoted and ardent of friends, and affectionate relatives, and of enemies I really make no account."

In March, 1887, he wrote in a postscript to *Specimen Days in America* (the first of the two volumes in the Camelot Series above referred to)—"At present . . I find myself continuing on here [Camden] quite dilapidated, and even wrecked bodily from the paralysis &c., but in *good heart* (to use a Long Island country phrase), and with about the same

mentality as ever. The worst of it is, I have been growing feebler quite rapidly for a year, and now can't walk around—hardly from one room to the next. I am forced to stay indoors, and in my big chair nearly all the time. We have had a sharp, dreary winter too, and it has pinched me. I am alone most of the time; every week, indeed almost every day, write some reminiscences, essays, sketches, for the magazines; and read, or rather, I should say dawdle, over books and papers a good deal—spend half the day at that."

The tenor of his life continued like this till his death, in the spring of 1892, in his 73rd year. His work has long been done, and considering the way he sang of death no lover of his can bitterly mourn his loss, or, rather, his translation, his entrance from the outer courts into the inner chambers of being. Nothing more strong and beautiful than the lines about to be quoted has ever been written; there are few greater men than he who could sincerely write them; and he whom they cannot touch must be a clod indeed. They are the lyrical expression of that highest faith which, with joyful acquiescence, accepts even death as the good gift of Him who doeth all things well. Men fear

death and rail at it, without considering that it is an essential part of a rational world-order, a necessary step in a rational divine process. The real evils of this world spring from our own free actions as moral beings. Of such evils, death, since it is beyond our control, is not the consummation; it is a provision of love, through natural law, for their alleviation. Many a one will find it difficult to accept these lines of Whitman, but if they are without justification the world is a farce and God is the Lord of Misrule.

Come, lovely and soothing death,
Undulate round the world, serenely arriving, arriving,
In the day, in the night, to all, to each,
Sooner or later, delicate death.

Praised be the fathomless universe,
For life and joy, and for objects and knowledge curious,
And for love, sweet love—but praise! praise! praise!
For the sure-enwinding arms of cool-enfolding death.

Dark mother, always gliding near with soft feet,
Have none chanted for thee a chant of fullest welcome?
Then I chant it for thee, I glorify thee above all,
I bring thee a song that, when thou must indeed come, come unfalteringly.

Approach, strong deliveress;
When it is so, when thou hast taken them, I joyously sing the dead,
Lost in the loving, floating ocean of thee,
Laved in the flood of thy bliss, O death.

From me to thee glad serenades,
Dances for thee I propose, saluting thee, adornments and feastings for thee,
And the sights of the open landscape and the high-spread sky are fitting,
And life and the fields, and the huge and thoughtful night.

The night in silence under many a star,
The ocean shore and the husky whispering wave whose voice I know,
And the soul turning to thee, O vast and well-veiled death,
And the body gratefully nestling close to thee.

Over the tree tops I float thee a song,
Over the rising and sinking waves, over the myriad fields and the prairies wide,
Over the dense-packed cities all, and the teeming wharves and ways,
I float this carol with joy, with joy to thee, O death.

III.

It is not possible in the space at command to give an adequate account of Whitman's writings, much less to discuss the numerous questions which they suggest. A few words, however, may be said in vindication of his poetic worth, and to indicate in a general way the nature of his message.

There are many who deny that *Leaves of Grass* has any right to the name of poetry, and there can be no doubt that the most obvious and urgent, though not by any means the most important, question which is raised by Whitman's book is the question of what is poetry. To give an exhaustive and final answer to this question is, however, impossible; but just as it is impossible to define fully and exactly such things as goodness, justice, and liberty, though we have no difficulty in recognising their concrete presentations, so, although we cannot give a definition of poetry that would reveal its inner secret and cover its future developments, yet, if we have an eye for it, we know it when we see it.

The ways in which the spiritual nature of man strives to express itself are many. Yet its different expressions (such as religion, love, art, morality, and the struggle for freedom) are but the organically related parts of the single aspiration of the human spirit to realise its own true or ideal nature. But what our own true nature is we cannot tell. "It doth not yet appear what we shall be," says one. "Man is not man as yet," says another. We are ignorant of the ideal towards which we are striving. It reveals itself to us bit by bit in our efforts to reach it. It is the effort itself, indeed, which is the gradual revelation. And so it is that poetry, as a special form or department of this aspiring effort of the human spirit, is a partial unfolding of the powers of the ideal man and must change, in ways of which at present we are necessarily ignorant, as man's realisation of his ideal self becomes more complete; and it is consequently not so improbable that the poetry of a higher humanity will transcend the poetry of to-day as much as contemporary man transcends the palæozoic mollusc, although in both, of course, the vital principle is the same. In short, since poetry, in its present stage, is not merely an aspiration

after the ideal, but is the ideal itself partially realised in a special aspect, it is impossible to foretell what will be its characteristics when it has become a fuller embodiment of the ideal; or (to use language less metaphysical and less precise) poetry cannot be defined because it is a hidden thing of the soul, of which all written poetry is but the attempted expression.

To this theory—that poetry cannot be defined, because it is not a thing which *is*, but a thing which *is becoming* and which can only be known in the same degree in which its potentialities become actual—it may be objected that poetry cannot be developing, since it is generally admitted that some of the earliest poetry of which we have any knowledge—the Iliad or the Book of Job—has never been surpassed. But there are some facts by a consideration of which this objection may be obviated. One is, that though the forces of evolution, both in the realms of nature and of spirit, are, on the whole, progressing towards a definite rational end, yet in some departments they are occasionally inactive or even retrograde. Another is, that poetry is constituted primarily by the ideas which inspire it and only in a secondary degree by the manner in which these

ideas are expressed, and although its artistic treatment has varied from age to age, yet the ideas which inspire it have been steadily enlarging, so that in a spiritual regard, which is the only vital one, Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Browning are greatly superior to Homer.

It may be said that this is an attempt to evade the question of what is poetry by a transcendental quibble. It is certainly permissible to call the argument transcendental, but as that is a word which has a different meaning for different minds it would be more accurate to say that the argument is one which, proceeding on the grounds of a perfectly rational idealism, attempts to show that we cannot at present completely define the essential nature of poetry or grasp its whole secret. And if it be objected, as it will be by many, that a rational idealism does not furnish grounds for argument of any kind, it may be sufficient, without discussing the merits of idealism as a philosophical system, to point out that from Socrates and Plato to Kant, Fichte and Hegel, Emerson and Carlyle, Browning and Tennyson, it has claimed the greater number of the best minds of every age; and that Christianity, the greatest spiritual movement the world has seen, is, in a philo-

sophical aspect, neither more nor less than this same rational idealism, which to many of our learned men seems to have no more meaning than the whisperings of an idle breeze, though the breeze, too, has its articulate message for some. The fact, moreover, that the question as to the nature of poetry is still open after so many centuries of discussion, lends support to the contention that it cannot at present be finally solved.

But in spite of all this, there can be no harm in attempting to answer the question so long as the various answers which it is possible to give to it are regarded as merely approximate and provisional; and if we cannot say with exactness what poetry is, we can safely say that rhyme, rhythm, quantity, accent, are not of the essence of poetry, but are merely the accidents of it. Occasionally we are forced to exclaim that some passage of a prose author is pure poetry; and still more often, if we were quite honest with ourselves and were not devotees of the idols which fashion sets in the high places of literature, we should have to admit that a good deal of what passes for poetry is nothing but bad prose. If, therefore, no special form of literary expression can arrogate to itself the

name of poetry, how is poetry to be known? The answer to this must be, that the test of poetry lies not in the poetry but in ourselves. If a man does not know poetry when he sees it, there is no treatise on poetry that would clear his eyesight. He will have to wait for the growth of the spiritual faculty by which poetry is discerned, and if he wants it to grow, and tries to make it grow, the germ is there, and grow it will, for to hunger and thirst after spiritual good is indeed to be filled.

Prose is the sober expression of the undisturbed intellect. Poetry is the language of a mind deeply moved by its own great or beautiful thoughts or perceptions, and able to give to its emotion an expression more or less adequate; and the final test of poetry lies not in its outward form, but in its power to make us feel as the poet felt. Let it obey every law of prosody, let it abound in happy phrases, quaint conceits, and dainty archaisms, yet if it leave its readers cold, it is not poetry. On the other hand, let it break all the conventional rules of verse, let its aspect be that of the baldest prose, let it jar on the ear as it stumbles from line to line, let it offend the taste with barbarous idioms, yet if it fire the heart of a

reader but here and there, it is true poetry. (In reality, however, there is perhaps no instance in which poetry is guilty of all these delinquencies at once. A certain grace and music, if not essential to poetry, seem at least to be inseparable from it.) In judging of poetry it should be remembered that it is a thing and not merely a form, and that its first office is to satisfy in some degree, not our artistic literary sense, but our needs and powers as men with living souls.

Poetry, then, originates in feeling, especially in that elevated moral feeling which is the highest of all; it only deserves its name in proportion to the adequacy with which it expresses such feeling; and the test of it is, that it should induce a similar state of feeling in the reader. Putting aside, therefore, all considerations of form and diction, and asking how Whitman stands this fundamental test, it must be answered that no poet stands it better. Arising out of a high unwavering faith (of that true sort which is but a supreme act of reason), his sincere and powerful emotion is overmastering. It is impossible to read him with calmness. His breath fills the drooping sails like a mighty wind, and the bark of the soul rushes onward

through the surges, buoyant, exultant. For those, therefore, whom he makes to feel like this, Whitman is a poet and a great poet. He belongs to the front rank of literature, and in the literature of America his is the greatest name. He is greater even than Emerson, for with equal insight he has a larger heart.

Another influence which he exercises over men and women of very different mental characteristics, is that he makes them feel that he and his works are one; and it is not so much his works that they admire, as himself that they love. It is not so much that he enunciates theories which rouse their enthusiasm, as it is that their higher nature is stimulated, as it would be by the personal friendship of such a man as was Whitman himself—serene, benignant, brave, of noble presence and simple habits, with a wide experience of life and an absolute confidence in the nature of things, with a heart full of love for his fellows, and a mind fit to grapple, and cheerfully grappling, with the deepest problems of the soul. It is not so much that he gives them new ideas as that he gives them new strength. He makes new creatures of them, and puts them into a renovated universe. He makes them feel the

essential greatness of man, so that they begin to assume an unaccustomed dignity. He causes them to see with a new tenderness in their eyes the divine light that enhaloes persons hitherto despised and rejected, and things till now thought common and unclean. From dark and dingy houses of caste and prejudice he brings them out into the open air and the sunshine, and what they thought were cracks in the sky they find were cracks in the windows.

The great and beneficent nature of his influence cannot be doubted. Examples of it have come within the writer's own observation; and when reading articles by W. M. Rossetti, Professor Dowden and others, one is struck by the effort which these writers evidently make to maintain a critical attitude towards a man whose greatness they feel, but are afraid to estimate. J. A. Symonds, also, the well-known writer on the Renaissance, has confessed that Whitman's writings revolutionised his ideas, and determined the course of his subsequent life. Critics may sneer, but critics who sneer are generally as far out critically as they are ethically, and facts like these must prevent earnest people from passing an off-hand judgment.

One cannot claim for Whitman, however, the stock graces of poetical literature. It is not for the absence of metrical form that he is to be blamed, nor for his occasional roughness of expression, but rather because of his frequent obscurity and flatness. It is not always easy to trace the sequence of his thought, and much of his writing consists of long and winding mazes in which phrase is added to phrase without much regard for the clearness or coherence of the sentence. If he has lofty peaks he has also arid plains. If many of his passages are as impressive as the rolling thunder, and some of his lines as illuminative and startling as a lightning-flash, yet he is often merely a maker of noise, which, though it is certainly loud enough to command attention, is yet without inspiration. Of these defects he himself was not unaware; and he compares his poetry to the huge chaotic scenery of the Western States:

Spirit that formed this scene,
These tumbled rock-piles grim and red,
These reckless heaven-ambitious peaks,
These gorges, turbulent-clear streams, this naked freshness,
These formless wild arrays, for reasons of their own,
I know thee, savage spirit—we have communed together,
Mine too such wild arrays, for reasons of their own.

In his address "To a Locomotive in Winter" he again very aptly describes the character of much of his writing :

Fierce-throated beauty !
Roll through my chant with all thy lawless music, thy swinging lamps at night,
Thy madly-whistled laughter, echoing, rumbling like an earthquake, rousing all,
Law of thyself complete, thine own track firmly holding,
(No sweetness debonair of tearful harp or glib piano thine,)
Thy trills of shrieks by rocks and hills returned,
Launched o'er the prairies wide, across the lakes,
To the free skies unpent and glad and strong.

Yet poems and passages of great beauty and pathos abound in his works. The poem on the death of Lincoln, for example, beginning—

When lilacs last in the door-yard bloomed,
And the great star early drooped in the western sky in the night,
I mourned, and yet shall mourn with ever returning spring—

for intense and lofty feeling is not surpassed by any elegiac poem in the English language. Even in the few lines just quoted, the note of a master may be detected.

The general characteristic of the outward form of Whitman's poems, and the only quality of accepted poetical form which they possess, is a rhythm at once majestic and subtle, com-

pletely separating them from verse as well as from prose, yet defying analysis. Considering his poetry, however, not merely in its formal aspect, but regarding it as an undivided whole in which matter and form are organically one, regarding it as the single and sincere expression of the mind of a poet who says what he thinks in his own best natural way, we shall find that Whitman's most general characteristics are a sustained and magnetic power, and a deep spiritual insight. He writes with the force of the primeval poets, as well befits one who is indeed a solitary singer in the early morning of the new day of men and women which has succeeded to that of lords and ladies, kings and hierarchs. In him the world, retaining the wisdom of ages, renews its youth. Confronting history, science, philosophy, he cheerfully accepts and absorbs them, and goes on singing with the joyful freshness that springs from perfect faith. In complete rapport with modern life, he is the poet of the great movements in which that life is expressing itself. He does not merely go to science for new metaphors, but he takes up the inanimate mechanism of science itself and breathes into it the breath of life. He is the poet, too, of that great move-

ment of thought which may be dated from the appearance of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* in 1781, which took a tremendous stride in Hegel, appeared in New England as Transcendentalism, and is still active as a powerful leaven in the thoughts of men. The ideas which are at the root of all that Whitman wrote may be described generally as Hegelian; and it must be an astonishing thing to many that the poet of the greatest philosophical movement since Plato, should have belonged to New York. Truly we cannot afford to despise Nazareth. And as this philosophy proclaims that man is not merely the puppet of natural forces, but is, on the contrary, both in his nature and in his powers, akin to the great Being who informs and sustains the whole of existence, so Whitman comes to the average man telling him of his native divinity and urging him to act worthily of his origin; and it is this recognition of the truth about the average man that makes Whitman the poet of Democracy.

The reign of poetry is said to be over, and, no doubt, the kind of poetry of which Tennyson, in much of his work, represents the consummation, has had its day. The poetry of mythical heroes and beautiful women, of romantic

episodes and outgrown ideals, has little vitality left. But the first clear and lusty note of a new, living poetry, which rebels and philosophers and men of science had long been preparing, was sounded by Whitman in 1855. The poetry of the future is the poetry of the free, individual man, the equal and lover of his fellows, and co-heir with them of the universe. Its special mission is not only to celebrate the democratic spirit, but to exalt and purify it. It is to sing of that ideal world in which men and women—the woman the equal of the man and the man the equal of the woman—are to find in their own souls the law of life, a law which, since it is the expression of their own enlightened wills, is not a law at all, but perfect freedom.

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